Conferencing Software Meeting
3/15/90 at WELL Office

Attending:

Mitch Kapor, Chairman
John Coate
Brian Dear
Patricia Dear
Cliff Figallo
Mark Graham
David Hawkins
Kenton Hoover
Kevin Kelly
Stephanie Leonard
Efrem Lipkin
Nancy Rhine
Hank Roberts
Jim Rutt
Mitra ??

Premise of the meeting

Is there an ultimate conferencing system?

How can the group best cultivate a conferencing system that let's people shine at what they're good at or are interested in -- to make an environment that allows others to create what ever they want whether it be technology or words.

Who are we?

The people -- or We -- who gathered at this meeting were all WELL users who realized the value of building communities through conference software. Communities could span a physical or topical space that could bind individuals (or affinity groups) together.

What do we want?

We were not a group of individuals who wanted to determine the WELL's next step, but in charting innovations that could benefit various forms of conferencing software. Each conferencing unit has its own character, a constitution that makes it attractive to its users, and we certainly do not want to detract from this uniqueness. What we want are better tools with which to link these separate units.

What is our mission?

Rather than try and build a piece of software that could be the next step in conferencing -- something that other groups are already well on the path of achieving -- our mission seems to be to create some tools that could promote interconnectivity.

Drawing on the strengths of all the individuals gathered at this meeting, we could possibly create specifications for the next generation of conferencing systems. We could push forward to define interoperability between diverse conferencing units -- a design of architecture for future conferencing software.

These standards would be based on a predetermined minimal operational level -- perhaps supporting TTY interface at least for mail. The standards would not be aimed at highly technical people, but would be designed to encourage information providers -- end users -- to communicate readily and effectively.

What is already out there and is good?

Many conferencing systems already exist and each have their good points:

APC - well networked, easy e-mail, system of folders, global, highly focussed conferences (e.g. Peace...), can access binary files good facilitator/host tools, good system of visit listings, menu options

Apple Link - self-evident, off-line interfaces, automatic on/off line interfaces, easy to get at, good graphics

Caucus - - nice line editor, distributed network (internet linked), multi-interfaced, co-awareness (i.e. know who is reading what), hosts have ability to exclude people from conferences, full text search capacity, lots of sites, open to design feedback, many hackers, comb structured

Coconet - on-line browsing, aesthetic (integrates color and form), hierarchal color coding, easy to see what is new, self-evident, emoticoms, good system of marking/referencing, includes advertising, charge flat access rate, transparent interface, Unix environment

Compuserve -- Large scale - the supermarket of conferencing systems

Minitel - Don't have to type - is all menu driven, built-in modem, populist (in France is the national directory), ubiquitous, supports IPs, good graphics, minimal censorship

Parti - Real person conferences ***(i.e.*** work with real names), preservation of anonymity, organized descriptions of conferences

Prodigy -- Flat rate, good weather maps, good jump ("go-to") commands, priced to be used by families

WELL - Unix access, hackability, open design by users, quality of content, own your own words, real on-line conversations, easy response mechanisms, identifiable postings, no copyrights, ease of interfacing mail and conferencing, linkability, fast, regional in scope, face to face meetings encouraged

What do we do next?

Knowing conferencing systems as they exist now do not ave common markets or common purpose, the next step seems to be one of constructive social experimentation. As a group we can spearhead a test that would link the WELL with other systems to allow users to share ideas.

What will the technical group design?

This test would actually be composed of two components: one group that meets and/or confers on how to build the standards/the technical interstructure and another group that would examine problems in accounting and/or editing.

Along with the folks who were at this meeting, some other people who should be invited to join this group are:

Meta Design Group (Lisa Carlson, Frank Burns)
APC
George Rhinehart
Larry Brilliant
FreeNet
FidoNet
Erik Fair
Geof Sears
Ian Peters
Stacy Horn
Joe Ito

The technical group, comprising of those folks at this meeting, will design the standards for transmission of information between conferencing systems. Assuming the WELL will be one hub of this experimental information transfer, perhaps ECHO could be the other.

This group would design RFC1036 standard headers that will include at least the following: From, Subject, Date, Newsgroup, Message ID, X_____ and keywords. This design will allow the transfer of information between ECHO and the WELL as well as between the hubs and front-end systems such as COCONET, PCs and off-line readers.

What will the other group consider?

Once the standards are designed, and the interstructure built, another group of individuals will meet to discuss how the actually sharing process will be done on an equitable base. Questions to be answered by this group are:

- How will writers be compensated for sharing their words? Should they be compensated?
- Who will monitor what will be transferred to other systems?
- What is economically/socially viable?
- How to compensate different sized networks fairly?

Many of the people involved in designing the system will also be valuable in these discussions, but so too will be other folks whose expertise lies more in publishing, negotiating and/or accounting than in technology design.

What are the next steps to take?

To accomplish the goal of setting up a test for this conferencing bridge, it would seem that the following steps must be followed:

- Set up a private WELL conference for the exchange of ideas on this topic -- including notes from both Kenton Hoover and Mark Graham on how it could be effectively created
- Exchange ideas with Echo
- Get COCONET on the WELL
- Meet at the ENA -- conference # I7 to investigate the interstructure details in depth
- Create a working example of the distributed conferencing system with the WELL as one participant
- Implement a system of information exchange standards
- Schedule a brainstorming session for group 2
- Explore the new economy of distributed publishing